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*Black Consciousness' Lost Leader: Abraham Tiro, the University of the North, and the Seeds of South Africa's Student Movement in the 1970s**

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The 1970s have come to represent a decade of student protest within South Africa, but in writing this period of history, scholarly attention has focused primarily on pivotal events in the latter part of the decade, like the Soweto Student Uprising of 1976, and the institutional history of organisations such as the South African Students' Organisation. This focus has, by necessity, neglected the contributions of non-urban, regional actors and sites of protest. It has also failed to contextualize the events of 1976 against a backdrop of student protest earlier in the decade. This paper seeks to situate the role of the rural Northern Transvaal in the student protests of the 1970s. It focuses on the rise of Abraham Tiro, a student at the University of the North and prominent leader in the South African Students' Organisation, and on the University of the North itself as a site of protest organization that influenced and changed student protest across South Africa between 1971–74. The paper argues that both Tiro's individual impact on national protest politics as well as the role of the University of the North as an incubation site for SASO greatly influenced the spread of the student movement during this period by facilitating the conscientisation of school and university students. Through events like Tiro's 1972 graduation speech, the Alice Declaration, and the influx of Turfloop students into high schools as teachers, the Black Consciousness brand of politicisation was effectively spread across South Africa's black student community.

On the 29 April 1972, a young man made a stirring speech on his university campus in the far north of South Africa decrying the inequities of apartheid and its policy of Bantu Education. He was part of an organisation of students that, though growing, was still mainly restricted to those black students who were privileged or lucky enough to earn a place at university. That organisation - the South African Students Organisation, or SASO - was three years old in 1972 and was striving to spread its new ideology of Black Consciousness on and beyond the black campuses where it originated. It sought to promote self-reliance and psychological liberation within the black community. The 1972 graduation speech at the University of the North, or Turfloop, reflected these goals.

We black graduates, by virtue of our age and academic standing are being called upon to greater responsibilities in the liberation of our people. [...] Times are changing and we should change with them. The magic story of human achievement gives irrefutable proof that as soon as nationalism is awakened

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among the intelligentsia it becomes the vanguard in the struggle against alien rule. Of what use will be your education if you can't help your country in her hour of need? If your education is not linked with the entire continent of Africa it is meaningless. [...]

In conclusion Mr Chancellor I say: Let the Lord be praised, for the day shall come, when all men shall be free to breathe the air of freedom and when that day shall come, no man, no matter how many tanks he has, will reverse the course of events. God bless you all!¹

The speaker's name was Onkgopotse Abraham Tiro and he was an education student at the University of the North, commonly called Turfloop. Situated on a rural farm in what is now Limpopo Province, its physical isolation was a key hallmark of its role as one of the five 'university colleges' that were set up in the Bantustans. Turfloop had been founded in 1959 explicitly to foster and educate a black elite that would serve in the Bantustans, a vision clearly articulated by a government report the year before Turfloop's founding:

Each [University College] should serve an ethnic group, enriching it both spiritually and materially, as well as promoting the broader interests of South Africa. Each should be entrusted with the task of developing all aspects of the culture, technological development and the promotion of the general progress and welfare of the ethnic group concerned. Each should guide the ethnic group towards greater responsibility, knowledge, self-sufficiency and self-development. [...] The students should be the pioneers in the whole process of civilizing the ethnic group concerned.²

Read in juxtaposition to Tiro's speech, it is clear that the founding ethos of Turfloop bore little resemblance to the ideals its students came to support in the early 1970s. Though both place emphasis on the responsibility to community, for the founders of the university colleges that community was very narrowly bounded – including only a single ethnic group – while for Tiro, it stretched across the breadth of Africa itself.

Turfloop students came from an unusually wide catchment area, given the ideology of separate ethnic education that underpinned its founding. They came from the Western, Eastern, and Northern Transvaal, from the Orange Free State, and from five different homelands: Lebowa, where Turfloop itself was located, Venda to the north, Gazankulu to the east, Bophutatswana to the west, and Qwa Qwa to the south. A large minority of students also came from the country's urban townships – mostly from those

¹ O.R. Tiro, 'Bantu Education', appendix to G.M. Nkondo, *Turfloop Testimony: The Dilemma of a Black University in South Africa* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1976), pp. 91-93.

² Main Report of the Commission of Enquiry on the Separate University Education Bill, 1958, pp. 14-15. Quoted in C. White, *From Despair to Hope: The Turfloop Experience* (Sovenga, UNIN Press, 1997), p. 74.

around Pretoria and Johannesburg. Turfloop became the university for students of Sotho, Venda, Tsonga, and Tswana ethnicity; this made it unique among the other university colleges, which were ethnically homogenous.

These students were a much more diverse group than had been envisioned by the framers of the Separate University Education Bill, and their senses of identity often involved connections to both urban townships and rural homelands. Many of those who came out of township schools had family connections to rural areas, and some who were raised by nuclear families in places like Soweto were sent away to extended family for schooling in villages. Even from its inception, the constituents of the Turfloop student body bore little resemblance to the 'pioneers', with singular affiliations to homelands, that the University Colleges were trying to shape. Perhaps, then, it is not so surprising that Turfloop produced a stream of prominent student activists during the 1970s and 1980s. By the early 1970s the university was becoming a site of student organization and political protest, and Abraham Tiro's controversial speech in 1972 propelled it into the national spotlight.

Part of the aim of this article is to consider what the legacies of Tiro and Turfloop in South Africa's historiography – or lack thereof – say about how the history of Black Consciousness, and of black student protest in the 1970s more generally, has been constructed. In recent years there has been a revival of scholarly interest in Black Consciousness and its ideology, including Daniel Magaziner's insightful organizational history of SASO, *The Law and the Prophets: Black Consciousness in South Africa, 1968-1977*, and the edited collection *Biko Lives!* by Mngxitama, Alexander, and Gibson, which is concerned with re-evaluating the legacies of Steve Biko and Black Consciousness today.³ These have helped to situate the important role of the Black Consciousness Movement and activists in South Africa's struggle history, and to fill a lacuna in the historiography. They contribute to our understanding of the structure and philosophy of the Black Consciousness Movement, and also begin to redress a trend in the literature that has been dominated by a few major events in the latter part of the 1970s: the death of Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness bannings in 1977, and of course, most prominently, the Soweto Uprising of 1976. But I contend that both these waves of scholarship – the earlier focus on 'big' moments and figures, and the more recent analyses of organization and philosophy – have marginalised, and in some cases neglected, the contributions of other figures and regions to that period of struggle history. In this article I make a case that understanding the roles of Abraham Tiro and Turfloop in the early 1970s alters our historical understanding of later developments in student

³ For an in-depth study of the evolution of SASO's organisation and Black Consciousness ideology, see D. Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets: Black Consciousness in South Africa, 1968-1977* (Athens, Ohio University Press, 2010); and for a look at Black Consciousness's influence on contemporary political thought in South Africa, see A. Mngxitama et al. (eds), *Biko Lives! Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko*, (New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), especially N. Ally and S. Ally, 'Critical Intellectualism: The Role of Black Consciousness in Reconfiguring the Race-Class Problematic in South Africa', pp. 171-188.

politics as well as the contribution of Black Consciousness ideology to student protest. To do so, I consider the early growth of SASO at Turfloop, and its close connections with the university's Student Representative Council; the local and national impact of Tiro's famous speech as a pivotal moment for protest on black campuses; and the ramifications of the university's reaction to it in the years following.

The Early Politicisation of Tiro and Turfloop

Tiro was born in Dinokana, a small village near Zeerust in the Western Transvaal, in 1945. By the time he arrived at Turfloop as a first year student in 1968, he had sporadically attended schools in Zeerust, Soweto, and Mafikeng. He was exposed to political protest at a very early age. When Tiro was 12, his primary school was closed in 1957 as thousands of women in Lehurutshe and Dinokana protested the introduction of pass laws for women. As Charles Hooper, a cleric based in Zeerust, described the scene:

The women remembered the takers of Reference Books. Had not some of them been teachers, and wives of teachers, in the school? [...] And were the children of Dinokana to be taught now by teachers who took books [...]? Mothers kept their children home. Older girls, girls of pass-taking age, set up pickets; and if the mothers failed, these girls turned the children back.⁴

After a few days, the Native Commissioner of Dinokana closed the school. In the wake of this closure, and in the face of a terminated education, Tiro moved briefly to Naledi High School in Soweto. He only remained there for a few months before a violation of the pass laws sent him back to the Western Transvaal, and to Barolong High School in Mafikeng. His principal there, Mr. C. N. Lekalake, noted that Tiro was deeply principled even then, and sometimes hard to handle, 'because he did not hesitate to object openly to whatever he thought was wrong'.⁵ When he completed matric at Barolong, Tiro was elected to speak on behalf of his class at the leaver's party. According to Principal Lekalake, 'Tiro's speech about the conditions the pupils were subjected to was so influential that dramatic changes were made immediately in the make-up of the school's administration'.⁶ This event presaged his role as an influential and charismatic speaker at university and beyond. Periodically during this intermittent schooling, Tiro also worked on a Manganese mine as a dishwasher and doing odd jobs to cover his school fees. He won a bursary scholarship to allow him to attend university and study education there. His Tswana background and the system of Bantu education in place at the University Colleges meant that he would do so at the University of the North. 0

Many of Tiro's deeply held convictions, which had made him a 'difficult' student at school, were informed by his devout Christianity. A Seventh Day Adventist, in his

⁴ C. Hooper, *Brief Authority* (London, Collins, 1960), p. 157.

⁵ Gail Gerhart Personal Papers (hereafter GGPP), 'Tiro Warned Saso: Expect Casualties' *Rand Daily Mail*, 5 February 1974.

⁶ *Ibid.*

early university days he set up a church youth movement with his friend Eric Molobi. As Molobi recalls:

At the time, we struggled with the scriptural teaching of equality before the Lord and the supra racial teachings of Christ and their contrast the abominable racist reality as experienced within the [Seventh Day Adventist] church. [...] We set ourselves up to defy the norm and challenged segregation, differentiated salaries within the church; we challenged the skewed authority relation in the church practices.⁷

Both Magaziner and Macqueen have argued for the critical influence of religion in the politics of many early Black Consciousness activists. Though coming from a distinctly different background than the mission-educated Biko and Pityana that Macqueen traces⁸, Tiro was similarly deeply influenced by his religious upbringing.

1968 was pivotal year for student politics on university campuses around the world, and South Africa was similarly impacted. While students at the Sorbonne in Paris clashed with police over the closing of their university, students on the ‘open’⁹ campuses of the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and the University of Cape Town endured similar confrontations with authorities. In August of 1968 UCT students held a sit-in to protest the removal of a black lecturer. Meanwhile, students at Fort Hare University in the Eastern Cape protested against being disallowed from affiliating with the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). Fort Hare became the first of the black campuses to undergo a sit-in by protesting students. Several months later at Turfloop, students found themselves in a similar conflict with their administration over being allowed to affiliate to the multiracial national student union. University administrators worried that the leftist, liberal organization would politicize the student body of Turfloop, but in fact the student body was already politically charged: Students protested that they were treated ‘like children’ and that they had no viable political representation since their SRC had ‘no proper status’.¹⁰ They staged a mass meeting and then a protest march to demonstrate their grievances and to demand affiliation with NUSAS. In the wake of the protests, Duncan Innes, the national president of NUSAS, went to Turfloop to meet with university authorities about the affiliation issue, but was rebuffed, ‘taken to a police station where he was questioned and finally served with an

⁷ GGPP, Nimrod Mkele’s fax to Eric Molobi, 11 November 1996.

⁸ I. Macqueen, ‘Students, Apartheid and the Ecumenical Movement in South Africa, 1960-1975’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 39, 2 (June 2013), pp. 447-463.

⁹ This refers to the policy of racial inclusion at South Africa’s core English speaking universities: the University of the Witwatersrand, the University of Cape Town, the University of Natal, and Rhodes University.

¹⁰ University of the Witwatersrand Historical Papers (hereafter WHP), South African Institute for Race Relations Collection (hereafter SAIRR) AD1912/258.16, ‘Different “Freedom”’, *Rand Daily Mail*, 26 May 1969.

order banning him from any Bantu Trust Area in the Pietersburg district'.¹¹ The university authorities successfully forbade affiliation with NUSAS and even prevented the Student Representative Council from offering public support for the Fort Hare protesters. Turfloop students lost the struggle to affiliate to NUSAS but used the loss to their advantage the following year when SASO was founded.

The South African Students Organisation (or SASO) was founded in December of 1968 at the University of Natal-Black Section, as the campus of Durban-Westville had come to be called. Its birth was actually the result of dissatisfaction among some black students about the ability of NUSAS to represent the interests of a black constituency. Harry Nengwekhulu, a Turfloop student and founding member of SASO, described discontent among black students in NUSAS over issues like language and flags of delegates, but in the following quote he points to a particular tipping point at a 1968 NUSAS Conference:

[T]he idea came initially from the conference of NUSAS at Rhodes University. Big problem again with that – normally at those conferences NUSAS would say “we must fight apartheid; we must sleep in the white areas”. We [black delegates] were doing that at very great risk of being arrested. When we went to Rhodes we said, “No, this time we’re all going to sleep at the location.” [...] And it became a major issue, because why should we have [the] risk of being arrested by going to sleep in a white area, and you [white delegates] are not willing to? If you are fighting the system, you must come and sleep with us.¹²

It was contention over this and similar issues which persistently divided black NUSAS members from white and finally led to the 1968 formation of SASO.¹³

The new organisation quickly rooted itself at Turfloop. Its inaugural conference was held there in July of 1969, and it was there that Steve Biko was elected the organisation’s first president. Abraham Tiro, then a second year education student, was in the hall at the time. But no sooner had SASO been established at the University of the North than it began to encounter resistance from the university administration. However, at this juncture, students used the administration’s refusal to allow them to affiliate with NUSAS in 1968 to their advantage. As described above, students at Turfloop had been disallowed from affiliating after a protracted battle between university officials and the

¹¹ WHP, SAIRR AD1912/258.16, ‘Different “Freedom”’, *Rand Daily Mail*, 26 May 1969.

¹² Harry Nengwekhulu, interview with author, Pretoria, 19 October 2011. [Note: All interviews conducted by the author and cited herein have been transcribed in full and are available from the author for verification.]

¹³ For more information on the foundation of SASO, see D. Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets: Black Consciousness in South Africa, 1968-1977* (Athens, Ohio University Press, 2010), and S. Badat, *Black Student Politics: Higher Education and Apartheid from SASO to SANSCO, 1968-1990* (London, RoutledgeFalmer, 1999).

SRC; in fact, two former rectors at the time had ‘encourage[ed] students to “shake off the yoke of NUSAS and to establish their own ... organization”’.¹⁴ According to Harry Nengwekhulu, Professor Engelbrecht, who was the acting Rector in early 1969, cautioned his students, ‘Don’t allow yourself to be used by NUSAS; you are not instruments’.¹⁵ SASO’s on-campus leaders like Nengwekhulu used this to their advantage. They garnered the tacit allowance of Engelbrecht and the university administration to operate on campus:

[Engelbrecht] never came out in support, or opposed. He allowed it to operate because we [argued that through our own organization we would not be ‘used’]. But also because we were attacking the liberal involvement in the struggle for liberation – liberals had always been the greatest enemy of the nationalist government.¹⁶

The formation of SASO, then, presented a challenge for the university administration: the formation of an all-black student organisation to supplant the older non-racial national union aligned neatly with the ideals of separate development, which underlay the founding of the University itself. It also marked a point of intersection - surprisingly, perhaps - between the politics of SASO and the vast majority of white university staff in its anti-white liberal stance. But staff and administrators were still trepidatious about allowing students to organise themselves politically, and they approached the new organisation with more caution than enthusiasm.

Finally, SASO was allowed to operate on campus, and in support the SRC put its weight behind the new organisation. In its first year the University of the North was responsible for hosting and funding SASO’s first conference. The SRC also participated in SASO’s technique for mass affiliation where, rather than having individual students subscribe to join an organisation, the SRC affiliated the whole student body en masse, on the strength of a majority vote. This differed from the individual-affiliation methods of most other groups on campus, and, critically, allowed them to dedicate a certain portion of SRC funds directly to SASO projects. The close relationship between Turfloop’s SRC and SASO was to be significant for both organisations through the mid 1970s – most clearly demonstrated by the overlapping personnel in the two organisations. The 1969-70 SRC was headed by Nengwekhulu, who went on to become SASO’s permanent organiser; the 1970-71 SRC was headed by Abraham Tiro, who followed Nengwekhulu as permanent organiser after the former’s banning in 1973. A bit later, in 1974, Pandelani Nefolovhodwe was, for a brief period, simultaneously the president of Turfloop’s SRC, head of its local branch of SASO, and the national president of SASO.

In particular, it was under Tiro in 1970-71 that the links between Turfloop’s SRC and SASO grew, just as SASO was further cultivating its organisational ideology. In

¹⁴ J.G.E. Wolfson, *Turmoil at Turfloop* (Johannesburg, South African Institute of Race Relations, 1976), p. 12.

¹⁵ Harry Nengwekhulu, interview with author, Pretoria, 19 October 2011.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

1970 it formulated the idea of Black Consciousness.¹⁷ Theorised by Steve Biko and other early SASO leaders, Black Consciousness demanded the psychological liberation of South Africa's black population. According to Steve Biko, 'What Black Consciousness seeks to do is to produce at the output end of the process real black people who do not regard themselves as appendages to white society'.¹⁸ It was a philosophical dialectic borrowing from global movements like Black Power in the United States, and authors including Frantz Fanon and Stokely Carmichael. 'Black' was not primarily a description of skin colour, but rather of oppression – as far as Black Consciousness was concerned, South Africa's blacks included its Indian and coloured populations. The premise was that apartheid – and race-based oppression more generally – had so crippled the way that ordinary blacks thought of themselves and their place in their country that psychological liberation was required before political freedom could follow. It demanded that South African blacks fundamentally rethink their identities. Following Strini Moodley, an early SASO leader, who declared political expression to be 'projection of the beingness', Daniel Magaziner has said, 'Black Consciousness offered a unique sort of politics: it was not something you did or believed, it was something you were'.¹⁹

It was certainly something Tiro was. The influence of nascent Black Consciousness on his thinking is very evident in his 1972 speech, quoted above, in which he criticised the fact that the administrative committees of the university were almost entirely filled with white staff: 'Here and there', he said 'one finds two or three Africans who, in the opinion of students are white black men'.²⁰ He complained that a black university was supplied in its needs by white merchants, staffed by white students in the holidays, and run by white leadership. He challenged apartheid on its own terms and found it lacking:

The system is failing. It is failing because even those who recommend it strongly, as the only solution, to racial problems in South Africa, fail to adhere to the letter and spirit of the Policy. According to the Policy we expected Dr Eiselen to decline chancellorship in favour of a Black man, dear parents these are the injustices no normal student can tolerate – no matter who he is and where he comes from.²¹

The aftermath of Tiro's speech was in some ways predictable and in others, extraordinary. Horrified at the indictment of their administration and the abuse of the platform he had been given, the white rector, J.L. Boshoff, and advisory council of the University of the North expelled Tiro. The all-white University Senate concurred.

¹⁷ S. Biko, *I Write What I Like*, (Harlow, Heinemann, 1978), p. 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁹ D. Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets: Black Consciousness in South Africa, 1968-1977* (Athens, Ohio University Press, 2010), p. 16.

²⁰ O.R. Tiro, 'Bantu Education', appendix to G.M. Nkondo, *Turfloop Testimony: The Dilemma of a Black University in South Africa* (Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1976), pp. 91-93.

²¹ *Ibid.*

However, by insisting that Tiro was the only culprit to be blamed, the University of the North authorities made a clear miscalculation. They failed to realize that his words had had an electrifying and galvanising effect; and, as Magaziner has noted, they discounted the ‘thunderous applause’ his speech received that day.²² A faculty member who was present recalled, ‘When Tiro addressed the graduation ceremony, we were there in the hall. And during his talk students cheered, cheered and accepted what he was saying. And some black members of staff – especially the younger ones - also cheered’.²³

The expulsion of Tiro marked a turning point, not just for the students of Turfloop, but for the staff as well. Until 1972 black and white academic staff at the university had co-existed in a joint Staff Association, which was responsible for academic management and making recommendations to the Rector and University Senate. Though social activities and living quarters remained firmly separated by race²⁴, academic and administrative matters were undertaken and debated by this joint body. In an emergency meeting after the 1972 graduation ceremony, this group faced the question of whether to support or condemn the University administration’s decision to expel Tiro. As remembered by Percy Mokwele, who was a young black lecturer in Education and one of Tiro’s teachers, at the time, it was a fraught discussion:

During the discussions of what Tiro said, there was great tension in the meeting place [...]. The chairman was, of course, white and he wanted the staff association to condemn what Tiro said. But the black members of staff said nothing to him – they wouldn’t agree. They didn’t support that motion of condemning what he said and that the university [was] doing well by expelling him. It was great tension. And eventually when, because white members were in the majority²⁵, when they voted they won that motion of condemning Tiro and supporting the administration for expelling him, the black members of staff marched out, led by the most senior black member of staff [...].²⁶

This walkout was the fissure that led to a fundamental and lasting division between black and white staff at Turfloop for many years. It precipitated the formation of the Black Academic Staff Association (BASA), and, by default, a white academic staff association. The issue of Tiro’s expulsion, as the quote from Percy Mokwele describes, had fundamentally divided the staff along the lines of race, and as tensions continued to heighten at Turfloop, the polarisation between the white staff and the black staff and students became entrenched. Increasingly racial divisions on campus were more prominent than those between students and staff, and in the mid-1970s, BASA became a vehicle for black staff to express their political support and solidarity with student causes.

²² Magaziner, *The Law and the Prophets*, p. 150.

²³ Percy Mokwele, interview with author, Turfloop, 20 September 2011.

²⁴ Percy Mokwele, interview with author, Turfloop, 20 September 2011; WHP, SAIRR 258.16, ‘Turfloop: Growing University of the North’, *The Star*, 16 May 1968.

²⁵ In 1972 white staff outnumbered black at Turfloop by approximately three to one.

²⁶ Percy Mokwele, interview with author, Turfloop, 20 September 2011.

The ramifications of Tiro's expulsion were equally significant for the student body. In reaction to Tiro's expulsion, the SRC led the students in a mass meeting, where it was decided that students should boycott lectures in protest 'until such time that Mr. Tiro be readmitted or tried before a tribunal'.²⁷ In response to this boycott, the university administration summarily expelled *all* students from Turfloop and required each to apply for readmission. This tactic allowed administrators to pick and choose who to readmit, with some knowledge of which student leaders had played especially influential and political roles. Those who were readmitted were required to sign a pledge agreeing that '(1) Mr. A. R. Tiro will not be readmitted, (2) The Students Representative Council has been suspended, and (3) The Constitution of the SRC has been suspended including the committees and also the Local Committee of SASO'.²⁸ Over the course of the winter holidays most Turfloop students eventually signed these agreements in order to return back to campus, but the entire SRC and 'other additional influential members of the student community'²⁹ were denied readmission for at least two years.

The impact of these protests was felt well beyond Turfloop's walls. On May 13, 1972, in the week following the mass expulsion at the University of the North, forty delegates adopted what became known as The Alice Declaration at a SASO Formation School being held at the Federal Theological Seminary in the Eastern Cape. The Alice Declaration referred to incidents of unrest throughout the country, and took particular notice of 'The oppressive atmosphere in the Black Institutions of Higher Learning as demonstrated by the expulsion of the TURFLOOP STUDENT BODY',³⁰ and resolved that 'all Black Students force the Institutions/Universities to close down by boycotting all lectures'.³¹ The Alice Declaration was taken up by students at the Universities of Fort Hare, the Western Cape, Zululand, and Durban-Westville, and for a time during the winter of 1972 each of these universities was closed by student protest. Turfloop's reach had extended far beyond the small farm in the Northern Transvaal.

Beyond Turfloop: Tiro's Activism in Soweto's Schools

Over the course of the winter closure, most Turfloop students eventually returned to campus, having signed an agreement at readmittance accepting the suspension of the SRC constitution and the expulsion of its members and Tiro. Several students who were known to be politically active – and all of the members of the SRC that had been responsible for inviting Tiro to speak – were permanently expelled, however. Abraham Tiro continued his activism in student politics immediately, unhampered by his expulsion from Turfloop. He moved to Soweto to stay with his mother and became a key organiser for SASO at the executive level. He was paired with permanent organiser (and fellow ex-Turfloop student) Harry Nengwekhulu as part of SASO's tiered approach to leadership.

²⁷ WHP, South African Students' Organisation Collection (hereafter SASO), A2176/Box 3, SASO Memo from Rubin Phillip, 24 May 1972.

²⁸ WHP, SASO, A2176/6.20, 'A Fact Paper: The Student Crisis', 1972, p. 3.

²⁹ Pandelani Nefolovhodwe, interview with author, Germiston, 27 September 2011.

³⁰ Emphasis in the original.

³¹ WHP, SASO, A2176/6.20, 'A Fact Paper: The Student Crisis', 1972, p. 1.

These tiers were designed to create stables of leadership within the organisation that permeated beyond the most visible leaders like Steve Biko and Barney Pityana. From its inception, the founders of SASO understood their tenuous position as an above-ground activist organisation. They were aware of the bannings of other political groups, including the ANC and the PAC, less than a decade earlier, and realised the risks of directly challenging the state. One way they successfully sought to delay this clash was to target a mutual enemy: white liberals. As I've argued here, at Turfloop this allowed the fledgling SASO room to develop without immediate interference from university authorities. But targeting white liberals first was at best a delaying tactic – conflict with the state would come, SASO activists knew; it was only a matter of when.

In order to maximise their influence and mobilisation before what was considered their inevitable banning, SASO devised strategies to prolong their existence and influence. One of these strategies was the layering of leadership. According to Harry Nengwekhulu:

[W]e had three, four layers of leadership. What we used to do at the conference, we used to have a straw vote. We would collect the votes, and those are the people who were elected. But we knew who was popular. [...] Tiro was attached to me, because we knew he was a good organizer. I tried following Tiro around the country; the idea was that you know, when we get banned, they could take over immediately. So we survived because of that. We were six layers! So even if they burned the first layer, the second layer – the third layer could take over immediately.³²

A pervasive organisational cohesion resulted from the layered-leadership approach, by ensuring that promising new cadres were indoctrinated and groomed for leadership. Gerhart has argued that SASO achieved 'a level of political education and ideological diffusion never before achieved by any black political organization'.³³ SASO's strategy to prevent banning of its leadership and to prolong the organisation's existence, then, also served to promote more thorough and deep-reaching indoctrination in its ranks. Importantly, activists were also engaged in reaching outside SASO's ranks to spread the message of Black Consciousness. It was SASO's goal to organise all sections of the black community as quickly as possible, before they were hamstrung by state repression. In the words of Harry Nengwekhulu, 'within five years we should have been able to mobilize almost everybody'.³⁴

In addition to its work at the universities and teacher training colleges, SASO sought to reach out to younger students who had not yet arrived at university. Abraham Tiro was instrumental in this approach. In addition to his continued activism within

³² Harry Nengwekhulu, interview with author, Pretoria, 19 October 2011.

³³ G.M. Gerhart, *Black Power in South Africa* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1978), p. 270.

³⁴ Harry Nengwekhulu, interview with author, Pretoria, 19 October 2011.

SASO, he took his university qualifications in education to look for a job. He found one a month or so after his expulsion, at Morris Isaacson High School in Soweto. The principal there, Lekgau Mathabatha, hired Tiro to teach English and History. Though his tenure at the school lasted less than a full academic year³⁵, Tiro's impact and legacy were significant. He was critical in instilling Black Consciousness as an ideology in the already politically active African Student's Movement (ASM) at the school, and worked to seek out politically curious and motivated students, striving to conscientise them in the SASO mold. Clive Glaser has indicated that this process had just begun around the time Tiro arrived at Morris Isaacson, noting that the ASM changed its name to the South African Students' Movement (SASM) in 1972 to be 'in line with SASO's more inclusive interpretation of black identity'.³⁶ During his time at Morris Isaacson, between 1972 and 1973, Tiro acted as the SASO representative to SASM itself.³⁷

The students who passed through Tiro's classes, and under his wing, were to become some of the most prominent figures in the next generation of student political actors. One, Tsietsi Mashinini, later became the chair of the influential Soweto Students Representative Council (SSRC) which played a critical organisational role in the June 1976 Soweto riots and their aftermath. Mashinini's first political exposure was at Morris Isaacson, in his history classes with Tiro.³⁸ Another of Tiro's students was Esau Makhethi: older than Mashinini, he had already moved to Turfloop by 1976, where he was involved in the reorganisation of the SRC at the university, and later became an activist and exile for the Azanian People's Organisation (AZAPO). Such direct links to students like Mashinini and Makhethi are evidence of how, in a short time, Tiro's influence had been compounded and expanded by his work at Morris Isaacson.

Other students expelled in the aftermath of the Alice Declaration stay-aways found themselves in similar situations. From Turfloop, where so many students had been expelled and politicised, more than ten former students moved into Soweto classrooms as teachers between 1972 and 1975.³⁹ In an interview with Clive Glaser, Jake Msimanga, a student at Sekano Ntoana High School during 1972 said that teachers who had been ex-Turfloop students were critical influencers of the 'conscientisation process' for high

³⁵ Truth and Reconciliation Commission testimony of Moleseng Anna Tiro, Case GO/00, 29 April 1996, available at <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/methodis/tiro.htm>, retrieved 22 July 2013.

³⁶ C. Glaser, *Bo-Tsotsi: The Youth Gangs of Soweto* (Oxford, James Currey, 2000), p. 162.

³⁷ WHP, SASO Collection, A2176/5.5, Composite Executive Report to the 6th General Students' Council (GSC), 7 July 1974, p. 2.

³⁸ See L. Schuster's *A Burning Hunger: One Family's Struggle Against Apartheid* (Athens, Ohio University Press, 2004) for a thorough discussion of political development in the Mashinini family, particularly p. 54 for Tsietsi's early high school education.

³⁹ WHP, Soweto Riots Collection, A2953, Affidavit by Aubrey Mokoena, taken by Justice D.L. Aspelling, Johannesburg, undated (c. late 1976), p. 18.

school students.⁴⁰ Similar conscientisation was happening outside Soweto as well. Pandelani Nefolovhodwe, a member of the SRC committee that had invited Tiro to speak, also found employment as a teacher in Sibasa, Venda in 1973.⁴¹ Even though he was teaching maths and science, Nefolovhodwe strove to politically conscientise his students by encouraging them to read all the available newspapers, and holding weekly class discussions on current affairs. He tried to keep these subject-relevant by gearing the discussions towards how science and maths could be used ‘for the good of society’. But he also picked particular students for more overt political education:

But I would add my own political activism; that’s what I used to do. [...] [I focused on] these ones who may finish schools and go to universities, so I was trying to link them with the activities already at a higher level. So that is what I used to do, and it went very, very well. There are a lot of others who went on to go to university and became very good activists [...].⁴²

The presence of these teachers in classrooms in Soweto and around the country was a critical way that Black Consciousness philosophy was transmitted to the next generation of student activists.

Morris Isaacson High School, in particular, was a major and early centre for student politicisation. The ASM had been active in the school since the late 1960s, as had the Student Christian Movement (SCM). By the time that ASM was changing to SASM, and incorporating itself more fully into the Black Consciousness Movement; SCM was shifting firmly into the political arena. ‘The concerns of the SCM [in schools] were primarily Christian but it was increasingly exposed to, and intertwined with, Black Theology, the Christian arm of the emerging Black Consciousness movement. [...] Christianity gave cover to mounting political awareness and debate [in these schools]’.⁴³ It was into this already increasingly political environment that Tiro and others arrived, following the expulsions and unrest of May 1972. For Tiro, with his devout faith and experience organising the Seventh Day Adventist youth around political issues, the intertwined nature of Christian and political groups for students was familiar and an important method of politicisation. The environment was ripe for such politically active teachers: ‘Mary Mxadana, who studied and taught at [Morris Isaacson], recalls that students talked enthusiastically about Tiro’s teaching. He asserted the need to move away from rigid syllabi, “to challenge the poison of Bantu Education”’.⁴⁴ He also became a sought-after advisor and speaker for student groups like SASM, eventually becoming the official SASO representative to SASM.

⁴⁰ C. Glaser, “‘We Must Infiltrate the Tsotsis’: School Politics and Youth Gangs in Soweto, 1968-1976”, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 24, 2 (June 1998), pp. 301–23.

⁴¹ Pandelani Nefolovhodwe, interview with author, Germiston, 27 September 2011; WHP, *State v. S Cooper and 8 others* (Trial Transcript), AD1719, p. 5561.

⁴² Pandelani Nefolovhodwe, interview with author, Germiston, 27 September 2011.

⁴³ Glaser, ‘We Must Infiltrate the Tsotsis’, p. 303.

⁴⁴ Glaser, ‘We Must Infiltrate the Tsotsis’, p. 305.

Exile and Assassination

As significant as this influence was, it was short-lived in terms of direct student-teacher contact. Tiro was dismissed from Morris Isaacson less than a full year after he had started. In her testimony to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, his mother said of his dismissal from the teaching job,

The school closed and they reopened and I saw [Onkgopotse] coming home. [...] and he said to me Mamma they expelled me again from school. And I asked him again why have you been expelled? No they just said I should get out of the school, I will teach my fellow schoolmates wrong information.⁴⁵

Tiro's 'wrong information' was almost certainly the SASO and Black Consciousness ideology that he had been imparting to his students, which had drawn the attention of government officials beyond the school itself. According to a *Rand Daily Mail* article 'In February [1973], after months of confrontation between the local school committee and officials of the Bantu Education Department, Mr Tiro was sacked from his teaching position at Morris Isaacson High School in Soweto'.⁴⁶ The timing of his dismissal coincided with a nation-wide crackdown on SASO and Black People's Convention activists: in early March 1973 banning orders were issued against the most prominent leaders in both groups including, among SASO's top tier of leadership, Biko, Pityana, and Nengwekhulu. After their banning Pityana and Biko were both restricted to their home areas of the Eastern Cape: Pityana to Port Elizabeth, and Biko, famously, to King William's Town. Nengwekhulu was sent to Venda, in the far north of the Northern Transvaal, and tried to covertly organise for SASO while there. Due to the restrictive terms of his banning and the remoteness of his location, though, such organisation proved all but impossible. After months in isolation at a house near Chilindzini in Venda, in September 1973 Nengwekhulu fled in the middle of the night, making for the Botswana border. He met Tiro, along with Bokwe Mafuna and some other SASO activists in Zeerust, very near the border and where Tiro had grown up. Together they went into exile in Botswana.⁴⁷

From Botswana, Tiro and Nengwekhulu remained active in their efforts to bolster student resistance within South Africa, and to raise support for their cause within Botswana. Among the SASO activists in Gaborone, Tiro alone had papers allowing him to move legally between South Africa and Botswana, so he assumed Nengwekhulu's role of permanent organiser when exile prevented the other man from fulfilling the role.

⁴⁵ Truth and Reconciliation Commission testimony of Moleseng Anna Tiro, Case GO/00, 29 April 1996, available at <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/hrvtrans/methodis/tiro.htm>, retrieved 22 July 2013.

⁴⁶ WHP, SAIRR, AD1912/239, P. Wellman and I. Segola, "Bomb Kills Ex-Saso Leader", *Rand Daily Mail*, 4 February 1974.

⁴⁷ Harry Nengwekhulu, interview with author, Pretoria, 19 October 2011; WHP, SAIRR AD1912/239, "Top SASO Men Flee the Country", *The Star*, 6 October 1973.

SASO's tiered leadership allowed for minimal disruption to their work even as major leaders were sidelined by banning and exile.

Tiro had little time to pursue this work, however. He was killed by a parcel bomb on 1 February 1974, only five months after fleeing South Africa. The parcel bomb that killed him allegedly had markings from the International University Exchange Fund (IUEF) in Geneva, but among friends of Tiro and officials in Botswana alike it was widely believed to have been sent by agents of the South African government.⁴⁸ The package was addressed in longhand, and hand-delivered by a priest with whom Tiro was living, just south of Gaborone.⁴⁹ For its part, IUEF denied that the package had originated with them, and also pointed to the South African government as the likely culprit. In a public statement they declared,

It is evident that this cowardly act has been undertaken by the South African government and its agents. It is equally evident that by putting on the parcel the name of the IUEF and its Director the South African government wanted to ensure that Mr. Tiro would open the parcel and also wanted to implicate our organization. Whilst they succeeded in the first of their short-term objectives, in the long term they have only achieved an escalation of the struggle for freedom in Southern Africa [...].⁵⁰

The public reaction following Tiro's death speaks to the impact of his activism both in South Africa, and for the short time he was in Botswana. In a memorial to him at their General Students' Council that year, SASO said, 'Circumstances surrounding Tiro's death have [not] been made absolutely clear, but one thing [is] certain, he died at the violent hands of agents of imperialism.'⁵¹ And the Transvaal regional secretary for SASO noted, 'It is a real tragedy to have one of the most able and dedicated leaders brutally and ruthlessly murdered', and then went on to describe the culprit as 'the enemy'.⁵² In a statement, the Office of the President of Botswana said

Mr Tiro had, during the last few years of his life been an outspoken critic of a so-called South African way of life under which Black South Africans are subjected to racial discrimination and many other indignities. And in speaking out against the denial to Black South Africans of their human rights, Mr Tiro had incurred the deep displeasure of certain powerful circles in South Africa. Mr Tiro's sudden and cruel death will in no way depart from the validity of his criticism of the politicians in South Africa. Nor will it intimidate others from speaking out in that country. For its part, the Botswana Government strongly condemns the inhuman

⁴⁸ WHP, SAIRR AD1912/239, "Tiro Bomb 'A Real Killer'", *The Star*. 4 February 1974.

⁴⁹ WHP, SAIRR, AD1912/239, P. Wellman and I. Segola, "Bomb Kills Ex-Saso Leader", *Rand Daily Mail*, 4 February 1974.

⁵⁰ GGPP, International University Exchange Fund cable, Geneva, 11 February 1974.

⁵¹ WHP, SASO, A2176, Composite Executive Report to the 6th GSC, 7 July 1974, p. 2.

⁵² WHP, SASO, A2176/5.5, Transvaal Region Report to the 6th GSC, p. 1.

and dastardly manner in which Mr Tiro's life was taken. The Botswana Government wishes to state unequivocally that this kind of terrorism will not make it change its attitude towards those who seek refuge in Botswana from oppression in their own country.⁵³

Activists inside South Africa also did not let Tiro's death pass unmarked. When the news reached SASO's branches in the Transvaal, members from across the region came to the office to assist with fundraising and organization for Tiro's burial. Memorials were held at Regina Mundi Catholic Church in Soweto, one of the township's largest churches, as well as in Kimberley and at Turfloop itself. Students from SASO 'and other black organisations' raised more than two thousand rand in support of a memorial held in Tiro's home village of Dinokana, and many, including those in the acting executive, traveled to the remote area of the northwestern Transvaal to attend.⁵⁴ Meanwhile, more than 1200 people attended a special ceremony in Tiro's memory at the Roman Catholic cathedral in Gaborone, Botswana.⁵⁵

The loss of Tiro was a blow to SASO, as well as to Turfloop and school students for whom he had been a formative figure in their political education. But rather than dampening student activism for his cause, his death furthered the resolve of the organizations with which he had worked. As the SASO Transvaal regional secretary at the time noted, 'The enemy must have really joyfully felicitated for the brutal and cold-blooded murder, though at least realising that on that very point in time a hundred Tiro's emerged and decided to join hands with those who are involved in the fighting against oppression'.⁵⁶

Conclusion

I have argued here that the roles of the University of the North and Abraham Tiro have been largely neglected from the historical narrative of South Africa's student protests in the 1970s. In an age booming with biographies of political figures, perhaps it is not surprising that Steve Biko has come to dominate the narrative of Black Consciousness, almost to the exclusion of other historical actors. And it almost goes without saying that Soweto has come to be the centerpiece of South African student protest. But I have sought to show how that imbalance has done a disservice to our historical understanding of the student protests of the 1970s, and indeed of Soweto itself.

Though 1976 might be called the 'year of the student', here I have oriented the critical period of SASO's development and influence on students between 1971–74. Tiro's graduation speech in 1972 changed the form and scale of student protest on black

⁵³ WHP, SAIRR, AD1912/239, "Botswana Hits at Tiro Killing", *Rand Daily Mail*, 6 February 1974.

⁵⁴ WHP, SASO, A2176/5.5, Transvaal Region Report to the 6th GSC.

⁵⁵ WHP, SAIRR, AD1912/239, '1200 Mourn Tiro', *The Star's* Africa News Service, 9 February 1974.

⁵⁶ WHP, SASO, A2176/5.5, Transvaal Region Report to the 6th GSC.

campuses across South Africa in several ways, some more subtle than others: it was the first time that black campuses protested collaboratively under the Alice Declaration, and it marks an organisational triumph within SASO to have mobilised such an event – albeit one that they then had difficulty controlling. Arguably even more significant, though, the expulsion of so many of Turfloop’s most politically active students had an immense impact on the schools in which they then went on to teach. Tiro is the most significant example of this, with his direct influence on the conscientisation of later student leaders like Tsietsi Mashinini, but there were many others – at least ten Turfloop expellees taught in Soweto classrooms between 1972 and 1975, and others worked similarly in other parts of the country.

Additionally, SASO’s links to the Turfloop campus in its early years helped to get the organization off the ground, and its close ties to the university SRC – particularly during Tiro’s tenure as president – meant that SASO was able to maintain a stronghold of support on the campus - even after it was banned by university authorities - until its own dissolution in 1977.

Finally, it is critical to historically contextualise major events like the Soweto Uprising. There are many important considerations in telling that story, which other authors have addressed – including a much fuller explanation of the African Students Movement, and influences of banned groups like the ANC and PAC.⁵⁷ The contributions of rural regions like the Northern Transvaal have often been omitted from such explanations, though, and with them the role of leaders like Abraham Tiro and centres of activism like Turfloop. This article seeks to redress that omission and to make a case for the importance of Turfloop, Black Consciousness, and of Abraham Tiro as a critical strand of influence on the school children of Soweto, and student activists around South Africa during the early and mid-1970s.

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⁵⁷ For an analysis of the history and role of the South African Students’ Movement, see Nozipho Diseko’s ‘The Origins and Development of the South African Student’s Movement (SASM): 1968-1976’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18, 1, pp. 40-62. For discussion of the role of cadres from both the ANC and PAC on Soweto in the 1930s to 1950s, see Glaser, *Bo-Tsotsi*, pp. 78-90. For the impact of underground representatives from the ANC and the PAC on Soweto’s students of 1976, see Schuster, *A Burning Hunger* pp. 55-57, 129-160.